

U.S. NEWS

Police in Jackson, Mississippi, want access to live home security video, alarming privacy advocates

Civil liberties advocates warn that a new surveillance tool would put people's everyday household activities under potential scrutiny by police.



— Small city police departments could expand their surveillance footprints by streaming live video from home security cameras. Glenn Harvey / for NBC News

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By Jon Schuppe and Bracey Harris

JACKSON, Miss. — Strapped for cash and facing a sharp rise in homicides, city leaders here are expanding police surveillance powers to allow residents and business owners to send live feeds from many types of security cameras — including popular doorbell cameras — directly to the city's real-time command center.

The new use of this livestreaming technology by police, which is undergoing a final legal review in Jackson, is drawing interest from other small cities that don't have the resources to build their own surveillance systems. But some have opted out, citing concerns about privacy violations. Civil liberties advocates say those concerns are valid, warning that the technology could lead to increased police scrutiny of people's everyday activities and more arrests for low-level offenses.

"What you see behind us is an opportunity, an opportunity to better observe and fill in the gaps," Jackson Mayor Chokwe Lumumba said last month at the ribbon-cutting for the city's new command center.

— Jackson Mayor Chokwe Lumumba, third from the left, cuts the ribbon on the city's new real-time command center on Nov. 19. *Bracey Harris / NBC News*

The move made Jackson, which has struggled to keep up with advances in high-tech crime-fighting, one of two dozen places in the country where police agencies inked deals this year with Fusus, a small Georgia company that aims to make it easier for American law enforcement agencies to build networks of public and private security cameras.

One of those agencies, the police department in Ocoee, Florida, said it planned to use the home livestream function as part of a deal with Fusus approved last month. Other Fusus clients, including police departments in Minneapolis and Rialto, California, said they are not interested in obtaining real-time footage from doorbell cameras. Several other law enforcement agencies have not responded to requests for documents or questions about their arrangements with Fusus.

The company helps police departments build networks of public and private cameras. The service includes devices – black boxes the size of Wi-Fi routers – that convert footage from just about any kind of camera into a format that can be fed, live or recorded, into a police surveillance hub. Fusus contracts with police departments, which typically sell, subsidize or give the devices to private users. Documents obtained through government records requests show Fusus listing packages from \$480 to \$1,000 a year per device.

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To some Jackson officials, the appeal of more real-time surveillance video is clear.

“What we’ll be able to do is get a location, draw a circle around it and pull up every camera within a certain radius,” Lumumba told the [local NBC affiliate](#) in October, after the City Council approved a 45-day trial for the program. “If someone is running out of a building, we can follow and trace them.”

He added, “If someone says, ‘I want my Ring door camera to be used,’ we’ll be able to use it.”

But the idea of police accessing real-time footage from a Ring camera – one of the best-selling brands of doorbell cameras – has thrust Jackson into a national debate over law enforcement’s increasing reliance on private companies to expand their surveillance networks, and the privacy risks that result.

“I don’t believe the government should be tapping into my Ring,” Jackson City Councilman De’Keither Stamps said, questioning whether there were enough safeguards to prevent the technology from being abused. “I don’t believe we should be sponsoring this.”

A reckoning in Jackson

Jackson, the state capital, with a population of about 160,000, ended 2018 with 84 homicides, the city’s highest count in two decades.

That year, the U.S. Department of Justice [found](#) that the city’s policing technology was outdated, leading to discussions about strengthening surveillance powers.

Lumumba announced plans for the real-time command center in early 2019, after a [string of deadly shootings](#). One of the most prominent victims was a Jackson pastor, [Anthony Longino](#), who police said was killed in a robbery outside his church on a Sunday morning.

But progress on the center has been slow and piecemeal. The \$4 million that the state pledged hasn’t yet been allocated by the Legislature, so the city had to [find other sources of funding](#). Jackson police used a Justice Department grant last year to install dozens of surveillance cameras, recognizable by their flashing blue lights and able to send live feeds to police. But older cameras on city-owned properties remained inaccessible for real-time surveillance.

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Meanwhile, the urgency to address the city's crime problem has only grown: In the first 11 months of the year, Jackson's homicide count has already surpassed that of 1995, its deadliest year on record.

The trial program with Fusus was attractive to Jackson officials because it helps save money by passing the cost of surveillance onto businesses and homeowners who purchase devices from the company.

On Nov. 19, the day of the ribbon-cutting on the new center, the police department launched the first phase of the Fusus pilot, streaming footage from the new cameras – along with hundreds more surveillance cameras already on city property, or owned by the state Department of Transportation – into the center, according to Sam Brown, a police spokesman.

— An officer with the Jackson Police Department monitors live feeds from security cameras posted across the city at the city's new real-time command center on Nov. 19. *Bracey Harris / NBC News*

The city has not provided a target date for its final phase, when businesses and homeowners will be able to register their surveillance cameras in the program, though some have already begun to buy Fusus devices. A legal review for the expansion is pending, Brown said.

Lumumba said at the ribbon-cutting that he envisions suggesting to residents that they make their participation in the program visible, much like the ubiquitous neighborhood watch signs. In areas where the city's blue-light cameras are prominent, crime has already dropped by 51 percent in the past year and a half, police said.

'We're not doing anything nefarious here'

Fusus says its service allows police to monitor feeds with less hardware and office space than many existing police surveillance hubs. The company developed it as an affordable option for smaller cities, Sahil Merchant, Fusus' chief strategy officer, said in an interview.

Camera owners can decide how much access to provide police, Merchant said. The options range from certain recorded footage to live feeds triggered by alarms to round-the-clock streams

to providing no footage at all. The police, he said, cannot access a camera's footage without the owner's advance permission.

"We're not doing anything nefarious here," Merchant said. "We're doing this for public safety, not at the cost of people's civil liberties or privacy, because it's all up to the individual user to share."

The Jackson pilot has brought new attention to the relationship between police and private technology companies whose products often drive law enforcement practices. [Hundreds of police departments](#) have information-sharing partnerships with Ring, the Amazon-owned doorbell camera maker. [Hundreds more](#) departments have built camera registries, where businesses and homeowners tell police they are willing to share footage from their security cameras.

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Some cities, including Atlanta, Detroit and New Orleans, have arranged with private companies to sell cameras to businesses, which then share footage with police. A growing number of these networks are outfitted with software that aims to identify people by their faces or track them by their clothing or license plates and feed all that information into police [surveillance hubs](#).

Fusus, which goes a step further than other surveillance systems by allowing police real-time access to home security systems, does not “offer or integrate with” facial recognition technology, Merchant said. But Fusus does work with other kinds of artificial intelligence-powered video analytics, including software that tracks people by their clothing, behavior and car, Merchant said.

Merchant said that Fusus considers links to home doorbell cameras less of a priority in its marketing to police departments than connecting cameras inside businesses and apartment complexes. But he said the choice to participate is up to individual owners.

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Ring has distanced itself from the Jackson program, saying in a statement that it “is not working with any of the companies or the city in connection with this program.”

In Ocoee, Florida, where the City Commission last month approved a trial run with Fusus, Deputy Police Chief Vincent Ogburn said the department would ask businesses and homeowners for advance permission to access live feeds of their cameras so that they can investigate crimes faster. Having live feeds allows officers to skip having to ask homeowners for their footage after a crime, he said, and allows officers to determine whether the homeowner’s description of the reported crime matches the video.

“If someone says, ‘We have someone breaking into our home,’ and they have a doorcam, and they give us permission and have signed an agreement, we can go into their camera and actually see the person breaking in,” Ogburn said. “We can have all the information we need once we get there.”

‘Big Brother is watching’

But by making deals with tech companies that channel feeds from private cameras, police are skipping the transparency requirements – public bidding, public meetings, public installation – that come with buying and installing government cameras, said Matthew Guariglia, a policy analyst with the nonprofit Electronic Frontier Foundation, which promotes [giving the public more information, and more say, about new surveillance measures](#). (In Jackson, the City Council approved the pilot with Fusus but there was no formal request for proposals, since the program is a trial.)

The foundation is troubled with police getting unfettered access to homeowners' cameras. Earlier this year, the group accused the San Francisco Police Department [of accessing livestreams from cameras run by a downtown business district](#) to monitor protesters, a violation of a local law governing transparency in government surveillance.

“We’re concerned with pretty much all of this,” Guariglia said.

Guariglia and other privacy advocates warn that allowing police livestream access to doorbell cameras could put people under surveillance as they go about their daily routines.

“If you put any neighborhood under a microscope, you’re going to find illegal things to arrest people for,” Guariglia said. “If the camera on your neighbor’s porch is pointing at your front door, will they see your 19-year-old son drinking a beer on your porch? Will it see your neighbor driving home with no license plate?”

Livestreaming also increases the risk of abuse by police, Guariglia said. “If the police can access your camera without a warrant because you gave them permission because you want to help them fight crime, what’s to stop an officer from peering through the camera of a young woman after she gets home from work?”

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The Mississippi chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union said in a statement that it wanted to work with Jackson to develop policies “to ensure the program serves its aimed purpose and avoids threatening constitutional rights.”

In Rialto, California, the police department hired Fusus to create a camera-registry program and build a network of public and private cameras. Although the new system allows for homeowners

to livestream their doorbell camera footage, the department does not plan to install Fusus devices in homes and will only request recorded footage from homeowners if police believe it will help them solve a crime, Capt. Anthony Vega said. Rialto has not pursued the livestream option partly because it does not want to risk violating people's privacy, he said.

"Our department isn't interested in impeding with anyone's civil liberties," Vega said.

The Minneapolis Police Department has used Fusus services since a previous version of the company, SecuroNet, provided surveillance technology for the 2018 Super Bowl. But the department has no plans to use livestreams from homes, Cmdr. Scott Gerlicher said. Residents might get the false impression that the police were monitoring their property for potential crime, while others may see it as "Big Brother is watching," he said.

At the ribbon-cutting for the Jackson surveillance center, Lumumba tried to assuage fears about how the technology would be deployed.

"This is not an effort to invade people's privacy. This is not an effort to take advantage of people's reasonable expectation of privacy," he said.

A security 'steroid shot'

Reed Hogan, president of the Belhaven Improvement Association, a historic residential district in Jackson, said the group has already installed the Fusus devices on its security network, which includes cameras at the neighborhood's entrances on public streets. It's unclear when the city will gain access to those live feeds under the Fusus pilot.

Hogan said he sees the city's initiative as a security "steroid shot."

But officials and residents note that surveillance is not a cure-all in this predominantly Black city where more than a fourth of residents live below the poverty line.

Lumumba cited food and housing insecurity and unequal access to health care as challenges that contribute to crime but cannot be addressed through policing alone.

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Felicia McClinton lives in the West Jackson neighborhood of Washington Addition, home to the church of the slain pastor, Longino. As president of the neighborhood association, McClinton supports the new surveillance program but also wants to see a stronger focus on addressing the underlying causes of crime, including unemployment.

“Some people have more time on their hands and get involved in drugs, which brings on robbery,” she said.

Aaron Banks, the president of the Jackson City Council, said that while the expanded camera network could help solve crimes, it should not come at the expense of hiring more police officers, of investing in social service programs or of people’s privacy.

“People don’t want to feel like there’s an eye in the sky watching them,” Banks said. “They want to do what they do on an everyday basis and feel free to do it.”

Jon Schuppe reported from New York; Bracey Harris reported from Jackson, Mississippi.



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